Arkady Gaidar

Chuck and Geek

Детгиз
1951

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MINI PROGRESS & MINI RADUGA

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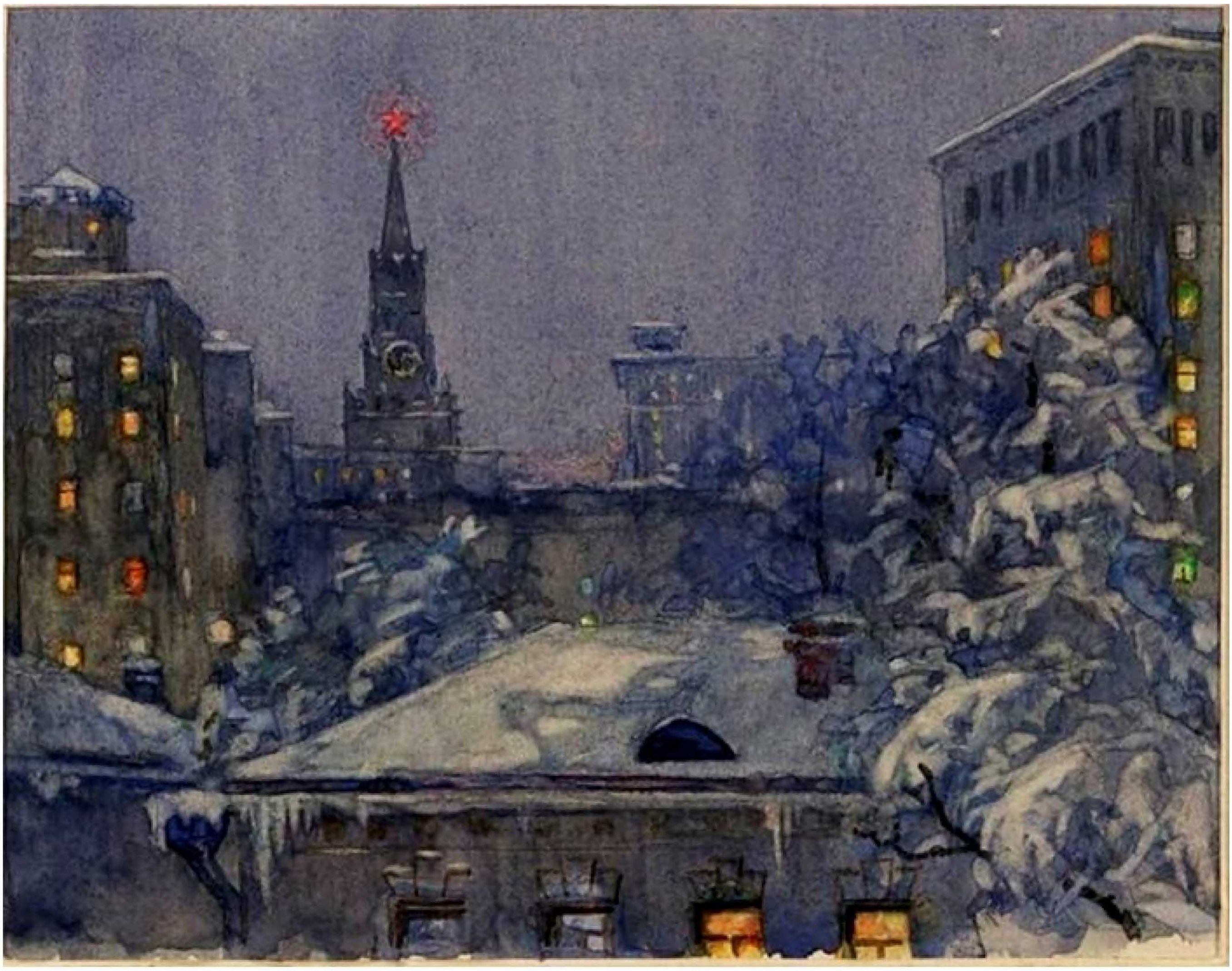


There was once a man who dwelt in the forest by the Blue Mountains. He worked very hard but there was always more work to be done and he had no time to go home for his holidays.

Finally, when winter came, he felt so terribly lonely that he wrote to his wife asking her to come and visit him with the boys.

He had two boys: Chuck and Geek.

They lived with their mother in a great big city far, far away—there was not a finer city in the whole wide world.

Day and night red stars sparkled atop the towers of this city.

And its name, of course, was Moscow.

*

Just as the postman climbed the stairs with the letter, Chuck and Geek were locked in battle. And a fine battle it was too.

What they were fighting about I no longer remember. It seems to me that Chuck had taken Geek's matchbox— or perhaps it was that Geek had made off with Chuck's empty shoe polish tin.

The two brothers had punched each other once and were just about to exchange another punch when the bell rang. They looked at each other in alarm. They thought it was Mother. And she was not like other mothers. She never scolded them or shouted at them for fighting. She simply put the culprits in separate rooms and kept them there for a whole hour, or even two, and would not let them play together.

And an hour—tick-tock—has sixty whole minutes in it. Two hours have even more than that.

So the boys quickly wiped away their tears and rushed to open the door.

But it wasn't Mother after all. It was the postman with a letter.

"From Father!" they yelled. "Hurrah! It's from Father! He must be coming soon!"

And they began to caper, leap and turn somersaults over the sofa out of sheer delight. Because, though Moscow was the most wonderful city in the world, when Father was away for a whole long year even Moscow could be a dull place.

They were so excited and happy they did not hear Mother come in.

Imagine her surprise when she found her two wonderful youngsters sprawled on their backs, shrieking and beating a tattoo on the wall with their heels; so vigorously, in fact, that the pictures over the sofa were shaking and the springs in the clock were humming.

But when Mother learned what the rejoicing was about she did not scold her boys. Instead, she whisked them off the sofa, slipped out of her fur coat and pounced on the letter without even troubling to shake the snowflakes from her hair; they had already melted and were glittering like beads above her dark eyebrows.

*

Letters, as everyone knows, can be jolly or sad. That is why Chuck and Geek studied Mother's face so intently as she read. At first she frowned, and they frowned too. Then she smiled. That meant the letter was a jolly one.

"Your father is not coming," she said as she put the letter aside. "He has a lot of work to do and he can't come home."

Chuck and Geek looked at each other in bewilderment.

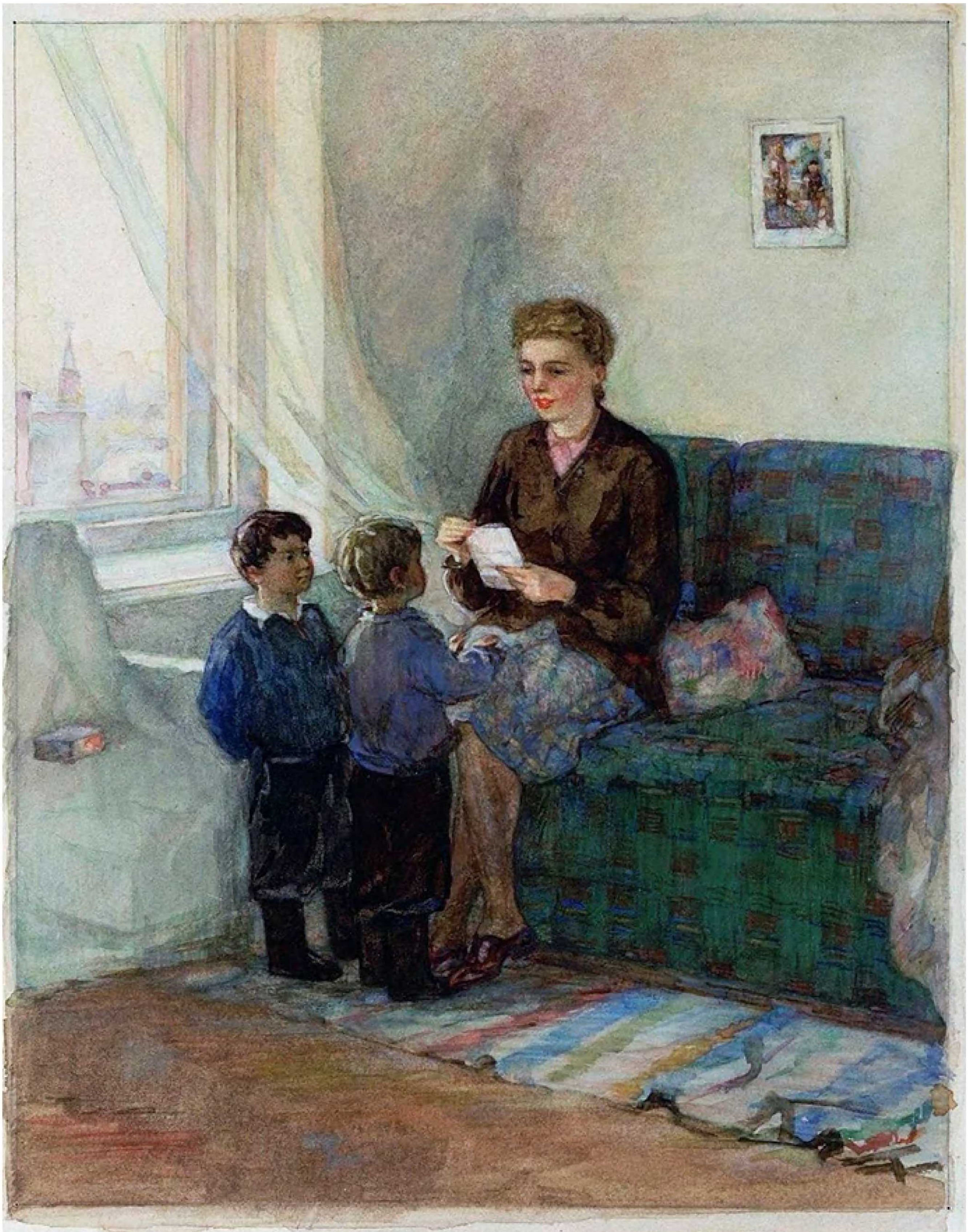
The letter had turned out to be as sad as sad could be. In another moment they were pouting and snuffling and darting angry glances at Mother, who, for some unknown reason, was smiling.

"He's not coming," she continued, "but he says we should come and visit him."

At that Chuck and Geek bounded off the sofa.

"Queer man!" Mother sighed. "Easy enough to say 'Come and visit'—as if all one had to do was get into a tramcar and ride off."

" 'Course!" Chuck put in quickly. "If he says 'Come' we ought to hop on a tram and go."



"You silly boy," said Mother. "To get there you have to ride in a train for a thousand kilometres, and then another thousand. And after that you have to ride in a sleigh through the taiga. And there, in the taiga, you're sure to run into a wolf or a bear. Goodness, what a fantastic idea! Just think of it yourselves."

But Chuck and Geek would not give the idea even a second's thought. They said they were ready to ride not only a thousand, but all of a hundred thousand kilometres. They weren't afraid of anything. They were brave. Why, didn't they drive away that fierce strange dog from the yard with stones yesterday?

They went on chattering and swinging their arms and stamping their feet and hopping about while Mother sat still and did nothing but listen to them. Then all of a sudden she burst out laughing, swept them both up into her arms, whirled them round and finally tossed them on the sofa.

Between ourselves, she had been expecting such a letter for a long time and she was only teasing Chuck and Geek because she loved fun.

*

It took Mother a week to get them ready for the journey. Meanwhile Chuck and Geek did not waste time.

Chuck made himself a dagger out of a kitchen knife, while Geek found a smooth stick, hammered a nail into it and—lo!—he had such a stout spear that if he were to stick it into a bear's heart, the beast would assuredly fall dead on the spot, provided someone pierced the animal's hide first, of course.

Finally everything was ready. The luggage was packed. A double lock was fixed to the door. The bread crumbs and the stray particles of flour and cereals were brushed out of the cupboard to keep the mice away. And then Mother went off to the railway station to buy tickets for a train leaving the next day.

While she was gone, Chuck and Geek had a quarrel.

Alas! if they had only known the trouble that quarrel would cause, they certainly would have behaved themselves that day.

*

Chuck, the thrifty one, had a flat metal box in which he kept tin foil from packets of tea and wrappers from sweets. Also a few blackbird feathers for arrows, some horsehair for a Chinese trick, and other things just as important.

Geek did not have a box of that kind. In general, Geek was a scatterbrain, but he certainly could sing songs.

Now, it so happened that while Chuck was sorting out the contents of his precious box in the kitchen and Geek was singing in the other room, the postman entered and handed Chuck a telegram for Mother.

Chuck put the telegram away in his box and went to see why Geek had stopped singing.

"Rah! Rah! Hurrah!" Geek was shouting. "Hey! Bey! Turumbey!"

Curious, Chuck opened the door, and he saw such a "turumbey" that his hands began to tremble with rage.

In the middle of the room stood a chair, and over its back hung a newspaper all tattered and torn by the spear. That wouldn't have been so bad, but that horrid Geek, imagining Mother's yellow cardboard shoe box to be a bear, was stabbing it with the spear for all he was worth. And in that box Chuck had stored away a tin bugle, three coloured November Seventh badges and some money—46 kopeks in all—which he had not squandered like Geek but had put away for their long journey.

At the sight of the battered cardboard box, Chuck snatched the spear from Geek's hands, broke it over his knee and flung the pieces to the floor.

But like a hawk Geek flew at Chuck, wrenched his metal box out of his hands and, jumping up on the windowsill, hurled it out of the window.

Chuck was outraged. He gave an ear-splitting howl and with cries of "The telegram! The telegram!" dashed out of the house without even putting on his cap.

Sensing that something was wrong, Geek hurried out after him.

In vain did they search for the metal box with the unopened telegram.

It had either fallen deep into a snowdrift or had dropped on to the pathway and been picked up by someone passing by. In any case, the box with the sealed telegram and all its treasures was lost for good.

*

At home, Chuck and Geek were silent for a long time. They had already made it up, for they knew that both would get it hot from Mother. Being a whole year older than Geek, Chuck was afraid he might come in for the greater share of the punishment, so he thought hard.

"You know what, Geek! What if we don't say anything about the telegram to Mother? What's a telegram, anyway? We can have just as much fun without it!"

"Mustn't tell a fib," sighed Geek. "Mother gets angrier when you fib."

"But we don't have to fib," Chuck exclaimed happily. "If she says: 'Where's the telegram?' we'll tell her. But supposing she doesn't, why should we start anything? We're not upstarts."

"All right," agreed Geek. "If we don't have to tell a fib, we'll do as you say. That's a fine idea, Chuck."

No sooner had they decided the matter when Mother came in looking very pleased because she had got good train tickets. She could not help noticing, though, that her dear boys' faces were long and their eyes wet.

"Now, confess, my good citizens," she said, shaking the snow from her coat. "What was the fight about?"

"There wasn't any fight," said Chuck.

" 'Course there wasn't," Geek confirmed. "We were going to fight but we thought we'd better not."

"Now that's the kind of thoughts I like," Mother said. She took off her coat, sat down on the sofa and showed them the stiff green tickets—one big one and two little ones.

Soon they had their supper. Then the noise subsided, the lights were turned off and they all fell asleep.

Mother knew nothing about the telegram, and so naturally she did not ask the boys about it.

*

The next day they left. But since the train drew out of the station at a very late hour the windows were black, and Chuck and Geek did not see anything of interest.

At night Geek woke up feeling thirsty. Though the little lamp on the ceiling had been turned off, everything round Geek—the tumbler dancing up and down on the white cloth of the table, the yellow orange that now looked green, and the face of Mother who was fast asleep—was bathed in a bluish light.

Through the snow-flecked window Geek saw the moon— it was an immense moon, not at all like the one in Moscow. He was quite certain now that the train was speeding through high mountains, from where the moon was much nearer.

He woke Mother and asked her for some water. But she refused to give him any for a very good reason and told him to eat a piece of orange instead.

Geek pouted but broke off a section of orange. Now he did not feel like sleeping any longer. He shook Chuck to wake him up. Chuck only snorted angrily and went on sleeping.

Geek then put on his felt boots, opened the door and went out into the corridor.

It was a long and narrow corridor. There were seats attached to the wall, and they shot back with a bang when you got off them. Ten more doors opened out on the corridor. They were all a glossy red and had shiny brass handles.

Geek sat on one seat, then on another, then on a third and so on until he found himself at the end of the coach. But at that very moment the porter came in with his lantern and scolded Geek for making so much noise when people were sleeping.

As soon as the porter had gone, Geek hurried back to his compartment. He opened the door with an effort, then closed it ever so carefully so as not to wake Mother, and jumped into the soft bed.

Finding fat old Chuck sprawled all over the bed, Geek poked him in the side to make him move over.

But horrors! Instead of towheaded chubby Chuck, what should Geek see but the angry moustached face of a strange man! It looked at him and barked gruffly: "Who's that pushing me?"

Geek let out a howl that brought all the passengers down from their berths. The light was switched on, and when Geek saw that he had walked into the wrong compartment he began to howl louder than ever.

When they realised what had happened, everybody laughed. The man with the moustache pulled on his trousers and tunic and took Geek back to his own compartment.

Geek ducked under his blanket and quietened down. The train rocked, the wind moaned.

The strange, immense moon once more shed its blue light on the dancing tumbler, on the bright yellow orange lying on the white cloth, and on the face of Mother, who was smiling at something in her sleep, all unaware of her son's plight.

At last, Geek too fell asleep. . . .

And he dreamed the strangest dream:
The train was stirring; it did seem
That voices sounded everywhere—
Each wheel with mutterings filled the air.
The speeding cars that formed the train
Did join the engine's loud refrain.
First:
Then forward, mates! The night is black,
But we must charge along our track.
Second:
0 engine-light, shine bright and far,
And match the matchless morning star.
Third:
Blaze higher, flames. 0 whistle, shriek.
O wheels, whirl eastward like a streak.
Fourth:
We'll stop our noise at journey's end-
When the Blue Mountains we ascend.

*

When Geek woke up the wheels had stopped talking and were clicking along steadily underfoot. The sun shone through the frosted window. The berths were made up. Chuck, washed and brushed, was nibbling an apple, while Mother and the army man with the moustache were standing at the open door, laughing over Geek's nocturnal adventures. Chuck showed Geek a pencil the army man had given him. It had a tip made out of a yellow cartridge.

But Geek was neither envious nor greedy. Yes, he was a moony old scatterbrain. Not only had he walked into the wrong compartment at night, but even now he could not remember where he had put his trousers. But he certainly could sing songs, could Geek.

After washing and saying good morning to Mother, he pressed his face to the cold windowpane to have a look at the places they were passing and what the people who lived there did.

And while Chuck was trotting from door to door making friends with the other passengers, who presented him with all sorts of handy little things—a rubber bottle stopper, a nail, a piece of string—Geek saw quite a bit through the window.

Over there, for instance, stood a forest cottage. A little boy in shirt sleeves, wearing enormous felt boots and carrying a cat, skipped out on the porch. Swish!—and the cat somersaulted into the fluffy snow. It scrambled clumsily to the surface and bounded away.

Now why had he thrown the cat out like that? Probably it had snatched a titbit off the table.

But now the cottage, the little boy and the cat were gone. Instead, there was a factory in a field. The field was white. The smokestacks were red. The smoke was black and the lights in the windows yellow.

What did they make in that factory? But wait! Here was a sentry box and, standing by it, the sentry wrapped in a sheepskin coat. The sheepskin coat made him look so huge that the gun he held seemed a thin straw. But don't you dare go too near him!

And here came a dancing forest. The trees in front twirled quickly while the ones farther back rocked slowly, as though carried by a serene snowy river.

Geek called Chuck, who had just returned to the compartment with a rich collection of presents, and now they began to look out of the window together.

The train swept past large, brightly-lit stations where not less than a hundred locomotives puffed and wheezed back and forth, and past tiny little stations hardly any bigger than the grocery stand round the corner from their home in Moscow.

Trains heaped with ore, coal and huge logs the size of half a coach flew past.

Once they overtook a trainload of cows and bulls. The locomotive was a funny little thing with a shrill squeaky whistle. Suddenly one of the bulls let out such a bellow that the engine driver turned round; he probably thought a big locomotive was coming on behind him.

At one little platform they stopped alongside a powerful armoured train.

On all its sides guns wrapped in tarpaulin jutted out menacingly. Gay Red Army men stood round it, laughing and stamping their feet and clapping their mittened hands to keep warm.

But one man, in a leather coat, stood silent and preoccupied near the armoured train. Chuck and Geek decided that this, of course, was the commander, and that he was waiting for orders from Voroshilov.

Yes, they saw plenty of things on the way. It was only a pity that a storm was raging outside and the windows were often plastered with snow.

At last, one morning, their train rolled into a little station.

No sooner had Mother set Chuck and Geek on the platform and taken their luggage from the army man, than the train pulled out.

*

The bags were heaped in the snow. Soon the wooden platform was deserted, but Father was nowhere to be seen. Mother grew very angry at Father. Leaving the children to watch the bags, she walked over to the sleigh drives to find out which of the sleighs had been sent for them, because they had another hundred kilometres of taigaland to cover to get to the place where Father lived.

Mother was gone for some time. Meanwhile a wicked-looking goat appeared on the scene. At first it nibbled at the bark of a frozen log, then it bleated in a nasty way and began to glare at Chuck and Geek.

Chuck and Geek quickly hid behind the bags. You could never tell what the goats in these parts were after.

But here came Mother. She looked very downcast and told them that in all probability Father had not received their telegram and therefore had not sent a sleigh to the station for them.

They called a sleigh driver. He flicked the goat on the back with his long whip, then picked up the bags and carried them off to the refreshment room inside the station.

The refreshment room was very small. Behind the counter there puffed a fat samovar as big as Chuck. It shook and whistled, and its thick steam rose like a cloud to the boarded ceiling where a few little sparrows had found shelter from the cold and were chirping away.

While Chuck and Geek were having their tea, Mother bargained with the sleigh driver. To take them through the taiga to their destination he asked a huge sum—a hundred rubles. But come to think of it, it was really a long way. At last they agreed upon the fare and the driver went home for bread, hay and sheepskin rugs.

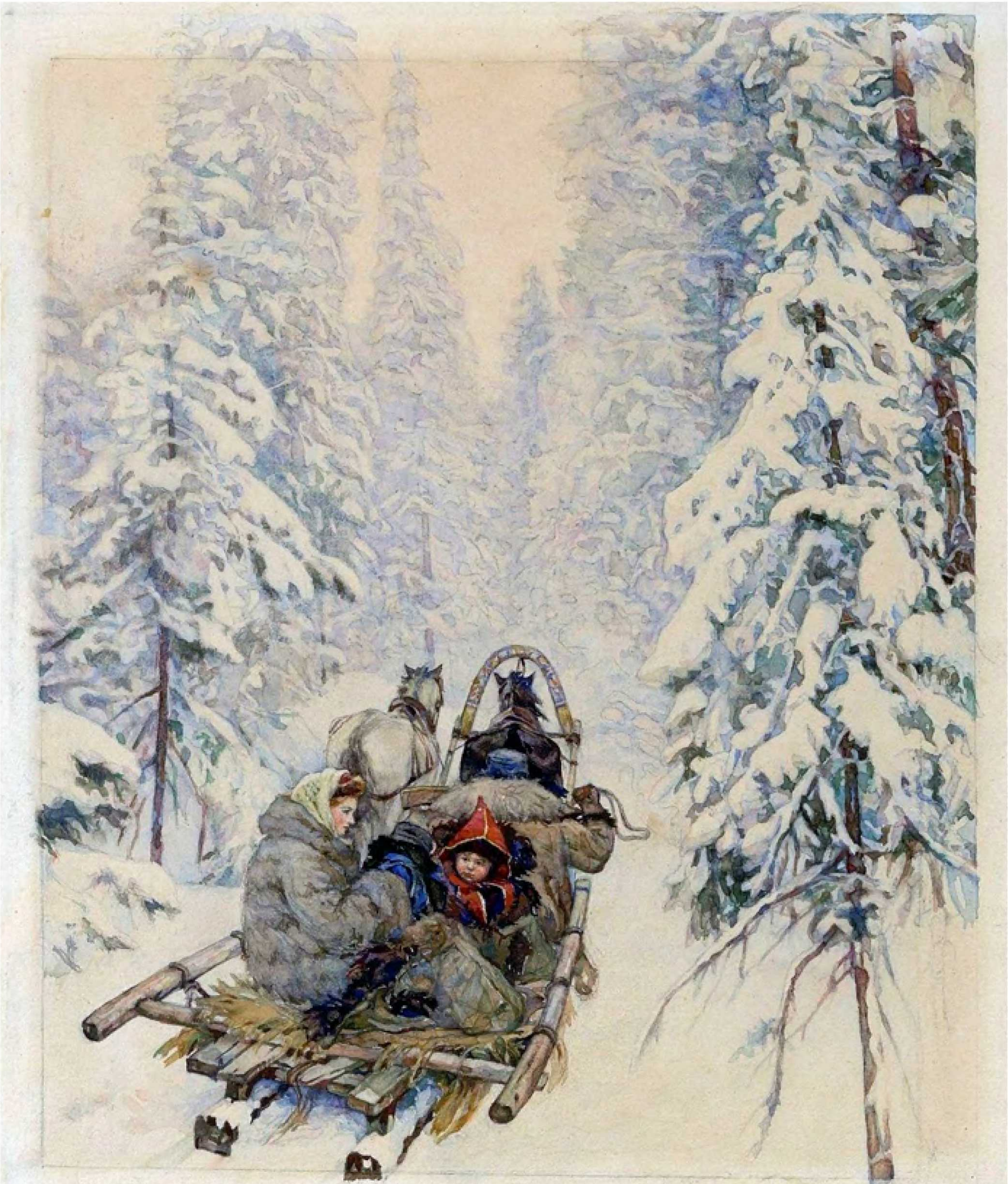
"Father doesn't even know we've arrived," said Mother. "Won't he be surprised and happy to see us!"

"Yes, he will," Chuck said very solemnly as he drank his tea. "I'll be surprised and happy too."

"Me too," said Geek. "You know what—let's drive up as quiet as mice, and if Dad is out somewhere, we can hide the bags and crawl under the bed. He'll come in and sit down, and all the time we'll be holding our breaths. Then all of a sudden we'll let out a whoop!"

"I'm not going to crawl under any bed," said Mother. "Or let out any whoops. You can crawl under and whoop yourselves. Chuck, why are you putting sugar in your pockets? They're full enough as it is—you've a regular rubbish bin there."

"That's to feed the horses," Chuck calmly explained. "Geek, you'd better take a bun along too. You never have anything yourself and you're always asking me."



Soon the driver came back. The bags were loaded into the roomy sleigh. Hay was strewn in the bottom and the boys were tucked in and covered over with blankets and sheepskin rugs.

Goodbye big cities, factories, stations, villages and hamlets! Ahead lies the land of woods and hills and dense black forests.

*

They rode along merrily till dusk, open-mouthed with wonder at the beauty of the hoary taiga. But then Chuck, who could not see the road very well because of the driver's back, grew restless and asked Mother for a bun or a patty.

Naturally, she gave him neither. He sulked, and for want of anything better to do began to push Geek and squeeze him against the edge of the sleigh.

At first Geek resisted patiently. But then he could stand it no longer and spat at Chuck. Chuck flared up and threw himself at Geek. But since their arms were pinned down by the heavy sheepskin rugs, all they could do was butt each other with their hood-wrapped heads.

Mother looked at them and laughed. The driver whipped up the horses and off they flew.

Two fluffy white hares skipped out on the road and began to dance.

"Hey, there! O-ho-ho!" yelled the driver. "Look out or we'll run you over!"

The mischievous hares scampered off into the woods.

A blustering wind blew in their faces. Chuck and Geek could not help hugging each other while the sleigh sped downhill through the taiga—sped towards the moon as it slowly rose over the approaching Blue Mountains.

Then suddenly the horses halted of their own accord by a little snowbound hut.

"Here's where we stop for the night," said the driver, jumping off the sleigh. "This is our station."

The hut was small but sturdy. And no one lived there at all.

A kettle was soon set to boil and the driver brought in a hamper of food.

You could have hammered nails with the sausage—it was so stiff and frozen. They soaked it in hot water and put slices of bread on the hot stove.

Rummaging behind the stove, Chuck found a bent spring.

The driver told him that it was part of a trap to catch animals with.

The spring was a rusty one and obviously was not being used. Chuck could see that right away.

After supper they went to bed. A wide wooden bedside stood by the wall. A heap of dry leaves made up its mattress. Geek would not sleep at the side nearest the wall or in the middle of the bed. He liked to sleep on the outside. And though he still remembered the little song sung to him as a baby, the words of which ran, "Lullaby, baby, my heart's pride, don't lie in bed on the outside", he always slept on the outside.

If he found himself in the middle, he was sure to pull the blanket off his bedfellows, dig his elbows into them and press his knees into Chuck's stomach.

They went to bed without undressing and covered themselves with the sheepskin rugs. Chuck hugged the wall, Mother lay in the middle and Geek slept on the outside. The driver blew out the candle and climbed into the bunk above the stove. They all fell asleep at once. At night, however, Geek felt thirsty as usual and woke up.

Still dazed with sleep, he drew on his felt boots, pattered over to the table, drank some water out of the kettle and then sat down on a stool by the window.

The moon had drifted behind the clouds and the snowdrifts seemed bluish-black through the frozen window-panes.

"Looks as if Dad has almost reached the end of the earth!"

Surely, Geek thought, there could not be many places in the world farther away than this.

Suddenly he lifted his head. He thought he heard a knock outside the window. No, not a knock but more like the sound of snow crunching under somebody's heavy footsteps. Yes, that was it! Out there in the dark something heaved a sigh, moved and shifted its feet. Geek felt sure it was a bear.

"Wicked Bear! What do you want? We're taking such a long time to get to Father and you want to gobble us up so we never see him again? Oh, no you don't! Better go away before someone shoots you down with his trusty rifle or stabs you with his sharp sabre."

Geek muttered these words through his nose, while he pressed his face hard against the frosted pane of the narrow window. He was both frightened and curious.

But just then the moon rushed out from behind the fleeting clouds. The bluish-black snowdrifts now took on a soft milky sheen and Geek saw that the bear was not a bear after all, but their horse that had got untied and was stamping around the sleigh, nibbling at the hay on it.

Geek was disappointed. He crawled back under the rug. And since he had been having unpleasant thoughts, he dreamt an unpleasant dream.

The strangest dream did Geckie dream:
He had a fright—an ogre mean
Stood spitting spit that burned and seared
And swung an iron fist and sneered.
Past raging fires, o'er trampled snow!—
The soldiers goose-stepped row on row.—
They dragged along the vilest dross:
A fascist flag with crooked cross.

"Hey, stop!" Geek shouted at them. "You're going the wrong way! You can't come this way!"

But nobody stopped or listened to Geek.

Enraged, he snatched up a tin bugle, the one that was stored away in Chuck's shoe box, and blew on it so hard that the preoccupied commander of the armoured train raised his head sharply. An imperative wave of the hand, and all those fierce, heavy guns of his barked out at the same time.

"Good!" Geek cried approvingly. "Give them some more! One's not enough for them!"

*

Mother was awakened by the twisting and turning of her two precious little boys. She turned towards Chuck, and something stiff and sharp pricked her side. She felt round and pulled out the trap spring which the ever-thrifty Chuck had secretly taken to bed with him.

She threw it behind the bed. Then, in the moonlight, she glanced at Geek's face and saw that he was having bad dreams.

A dream, of course, is not a spring and you cannot throw it away. But it can be blown away. So she turned him on his side and, rocking him gently, began to blow on his flushed little forehead.

Soon Geek smacked his lips and smiled. That meant his bad dreams had been blown away.

After that Mother got out of bed and went over to the window in her stockinged feet. It had not yet dawned and the sky was still full of stars. Some of the stars twinkled at a great distance while others hung right over the taiga.

And—strange thing! Sitting where little Geek had been sitting she thought just as he had that there surely could not be many places in the world farther away than this spot that her adventuresome husband had come to.

*

The whole of the following day their way lay through forests and over hills. When they rode uphill, the driver got out and plodded alongside in the snow. But on the steep downgrades their sleigh slid so rapidly that Chuck and Geek felt as if sleigh, horses and all were shooting down from the skies.

At last, towards evening, when both travellers and horses were pretty tired out, the driver said:

"Well, here we are! Behind that point there's a turn. And in the opening beyond we'll find the camp."

"Come on, there! Giddap!"

Chuck and Geek jumped up, squealing with delight, but at that moment the sleigh jerked and they both tumbled back into the hay.

Mother smiled and threw back the woollen scarf that had been wrapped round her fluffy hat.

Here was the turn. The sleigh veered smartly and came to a stop near three little houses standing in a small opening in the forest that was sheltered from the winds. But how strange! Not a single dog barked and there was not a soul in sight. No smoke came from the chimneys. All the pathways were snowed over and all round reigned the stillness of a graveyard in winter. The only living things in sight were a few black-and-white magpies hopping about stupidly from tree to tree.

"Are you sure this is the place?" Mother asked the driver in a frightened voice.

"This is it all right," he said. "Those three houses over there are Geological Research Station No. 3. There's a sign on the post ... see? Could it be Station No. 4 you're wanting? If so, that's about two hundred kilometres in the other direction."

"No, no," Mother said, as she stared at the sign. "This is the one we're looking for. But the doors are all locked and there's snow on the porches. Where can everybody be?"

"That I can't say," the driver said, perplexed. "Last week we brought provisions: some flour, onions and potatoes. All the men were here. Eight of them not counting the chief and the watchman. A fine kettle of fish! The wolves couldn't have gobbled 'em all up. You wait here while I look in the watchman's house."

Throwing off his sheepskin rug, the driver ploughed through the snow to the farthest hut.

He soon came back.

"The house is empty but the stove is still warm. The watchman must be around—he's probably out hunting. He'll be back before night and tell you everything you want to know."

"But what can he tell me?" Mother cried. "I can see myself that the men have been gone for some time."

"Don't know what he'll tell you," replied the driver. "But tell you something he will, because he's the watchman."

They drove up to the porch of the watchman's hut with great difficulty. A narrow path led from it to the forest.

They walked into the entranceway, past shovels, brooms, axes and sticks, past a frozen bearskin hanging from an iron hook, and entered the room. The driver brought up the rear with the bags.

It was warm in the hut.

The driver went out to feed the horses. In silence Mother helped the frightened boys off with their coats.

"That's an awful long way to come and find Father gone!"

Mother sank down on a bench and thought hard. What had happened? Why was the camp deserted? What were they to do now? Go back? But she had only just enough money to pay the driver as it was. They would have to wait for the watchman. But the driver would leave in three hours' time—and what if the watchman did not return before then? The nearest railway station and telegraph office were almost a hundred kilometres away.

The driver came in, glanced round the room, sniffed, and then went up to the stove and looked into the oven.

"The watchman will be back before nightfall," he assured them. "See, here's a pot of cabbage soup. If he were off on a long trip he'd have put the soup out in the cold. But do as you think best," he continued. "Seeing as things are, I can take you back to the station free of charge; I'm not hard-hearted."

"No," Mother said. "It's no use our going back to the station."

They put the kettle on again, warmed the sausage, and ate and drank. While Mother brought out their things, Chuck and Geek climbed up to the warm bunk above the stove. There it smelt of birch twigs and warm sheepskins and pine shavings. Since Mother was upset and silent Chuck and Geek were silent too. But it was hard to be quiet for any length of time, so, for want of anything better to do, Chuck and Geek soon fell fast asleep.

They did not hear the driver leave, or Mother climb up and lie down beside them. They awoke when it was already very dark in the hut. The three of them were roused at the same time by the sound of stamping on the porch. Something fell with a loud clatter in the entranceway—a spade, probably. The door swung open and the watchman walked in with a lantern in his hand and a big shaggy dog at his heels. He slipped his rifle off his back, threw a dead hare on the bench and, lifting his lantern over the stove, said:

"Now who are you people?"

"I'm the wife of Seryogin, the chief of the geological party," replied Mother, climbing down from the bunk, "and these are his children."

The watchman raised his lantern to the scared faces of Chuck and Geek.

"The dead spit of their Dad, all right. Especially this chubby fellow here." He pointed his finger at Chuck.

Chuck and Geek were hurt. Chuck, because the man said he was chubby, and Geek, because he thought he looked more like his father than Chuck.

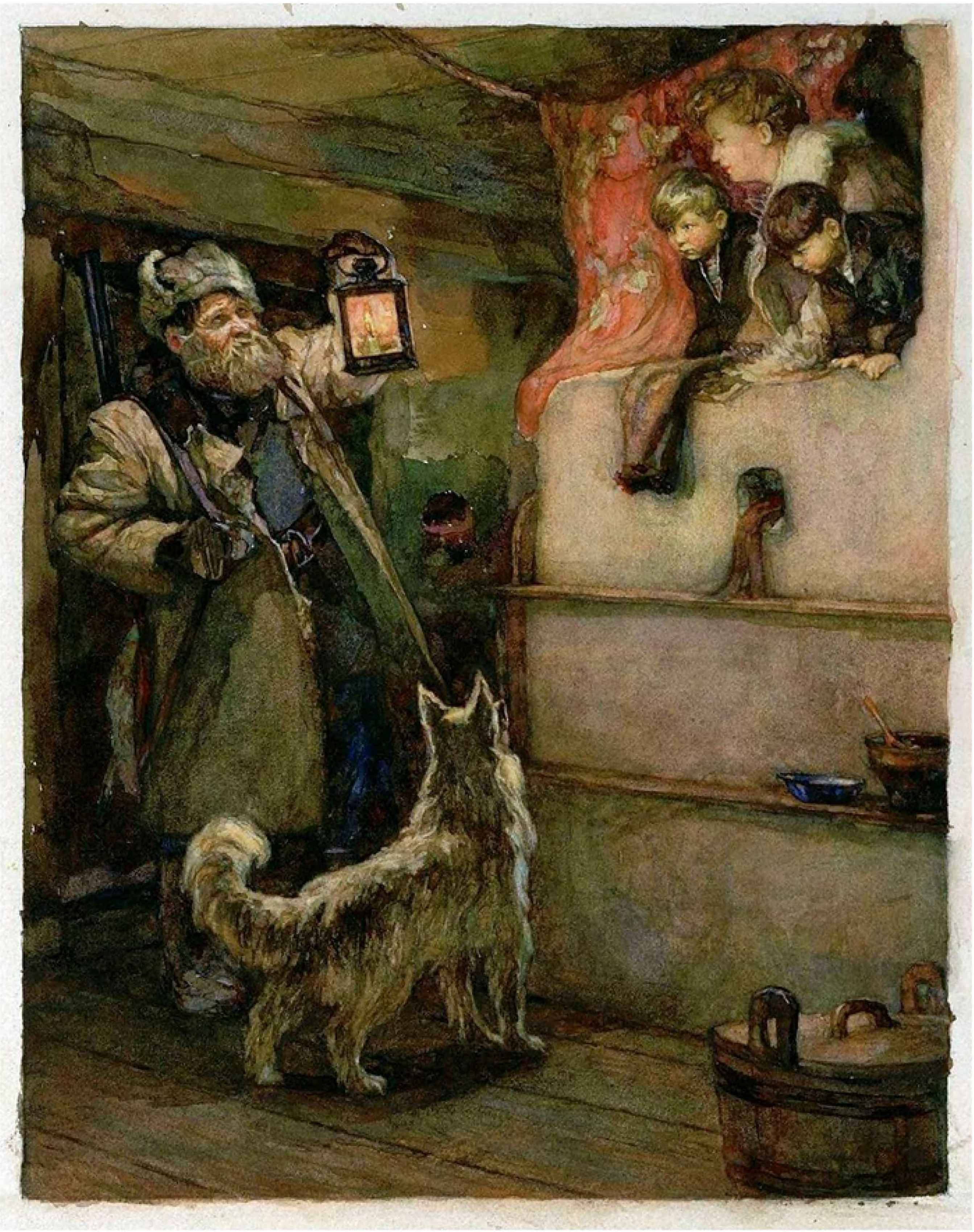
"Now why have you come rushing out here like this?" the watchman said, glancing at Mother. "You were told not to come, you know."

"I don't know what you mean. Who told us not to come?"

"You were told not to come. I myself took Seryogin's telegram to the station, and it said clear as anything: 'Postpone arrival two weeks. Party urgently going into taiga.'

"And when Seryogin says, 'Postpone arrival', it means postpone arrival. Breaking orders, that's what you're doing."

"What telegram are you talking about?" Mother asked. "We didn't get any telegram." And as though seeking confirmation, she looked up dazedly at Chuck and Geek. But she found them eyeing each other with alarm and backing quickly towards the wall.



"Children," she said, glancing at the boys with suspicion. "Did a telegram come while I was out of the house?"

Up on the bunk the dry twigs and shavings crackled, but there was no answer.

"Answer me, tormentors!" Mother cried. "Did you receive a telegram while I was out and forget to give it to me?"

Several more seconds passed. Then suddenly a lusty bawl poured forth from the bunk. Chuck's voice sounded the lower notes of the register while Geek's took the high notes and trills.

"You wicked children!" Mother exclaimed. "You'll be the death of me yet. Stop that noise now and tell me what happened."

At the mention of the word "death", Chuck and Geek howled still louder. Quite some time passed before they could be made to tell their sad tale, not without much shameless wrangling as to whose fault it was.

*

Well, what can one do with such children? Take a stick to them? Put them in prison? Shackle them with ball and chain and send them out to hard labour? No, Mother did not do any of these things. She only sighed and ordered her sons to climb down from the bunk, wipe their noses and wash themselves, and then asked the watchman what he thought she should do now.

The watchman said that the geological party had gone off to the Alkarash Gorge on an urgent assignment and would not be back for at least ten days.

"But how can we get along for ten days?" Mother asked. "We haven't any food with us!"

"You'll have to manage somehow," the watchman replied. "I'll leave you some bread and you can have that hare—skin it and cook it. Tomorrow I have to go into the taiga for a couple of days. To inspect my traps."

"I don't like that," Mother said. "How can we stay here alone? We don't know anything about the place, and all round us there's nothing but the forest and beasts. . . ."

"I'll leave you a gun," said the watchman. "There's wood in the shed, and a spring beyond the hillock. This is a sack of cereals. The salt's in this can. I haven't got time, you understand, to bother with you... ."

"Ooh, what a nasty man," Geek whispered to Chuck. "Come on, Chuck, let's give him a piece of our mind."

"No," said Chuck. "If we do that, he'll throw us out of the house. Better wait until Dad comes. We'll tell on him then."

"Until Dad comes? But he won't be here for ever so long."

Geek went up to Mother, climbed on her lap, and, knitting his eyebrows, scowled at the rude watchman.

The watchman took off his fur jacket and came up to the table on which the lantern stood.

Only then did Geek notice that a large piece of fur had been ripped out of the back of the jacket, all the way down from shoulder to beltline.

"The cabbage soup's in the stove," he said to Mother. "The spoons and bowls are over there on the shelf. Sit down and eat. Meanwhile I'll tend to my coat."

"You're the host here," said Mother. "You set out the food and give me your coat. I'm sure I'll do a better patching job on it than you."

The watchman glanced up at her and encountered Geek's stern glare.

"Oho! You're a stubborn lot, I can see that," he muttered. Giving her his coat, he got up and went to the shelf for the plates.

"Where did you get all torn up like that?" Chuck asked, pointing to the rip.

"Had a little scrap with a bear. He gave me a scratch," the watchman replied unwillingly, as he plunked a heavy pot of cabbage soup on the table.

"Did you hear that, Geek?" cried Chuck, when the watchman left the room. "He had a fight with a bear; I suppose that's why he's so angry today."

Geek had heard, but he did not like to see his mother mistreated by anyone, even if it were a man who could scrap single-handed with a bear.

*

At daybreak the next morning, the watchman collected his sack, gun and dog, put on. his skis and plunged into the taiga. Now they had to shift for themselves.

All three went out for water. On the other side of the hillock a little spring gushed out into the snow from an overhanging rock. Steam, as dense as a kettle's, rose from the water, but when Chuck put his finger into the spring he found that the water was ice-cold.

Next they brought in some wood. Mother did not know how to start the huge stove and the wood would not catch fire for a long time. When it finally did begin to burn, the flames were so hot that the thick layer of ice on the window of the opposite wall melted off almost at once. Now you could see the fringe of the forest through it, and the trees with the magpies hopping from branch to branch, and the rocky peaks of the Blue Mountains.

Mother knew how to pluck and draw a chicken, but she had never skinned a hare before. In the time she spent on it, a cow or a bull could easily have been skinned.

Geek didn't like the skinning a bit, but Chuck willingly helped Mother and was rewarded with the hare's tail; it was so light and fluffy that it floated through the air like a parachute when he threw it down from the stove bunk.

After dinner the three of them went out for a walk. Chuck urged Mother to take along the gun or at least a few cartridges. But she would not take the gun.

Instead, she hung it on the highest hook, then stood on a stool and put the cartridges away on the topmost shelf, warning Chuck that if he should dare to take a single cartridge he'd never know a day of peace again.

Chuck reddened and scampered away. A cartridge already lay in his pocket.

It was an unusual walk indeed. They went in single file along the narrow path leading to the spring. The sky above shone a cold blue and the jagged cliffs of the Blue Mountains loomed like dream castles and towers. The inquisitive magpies broke the frosty silence with their cries. Nimble-footed grey squirrels leapt and dived through the thick branches of the cedars. Under the trees the footprints of strange beasts and birds had woven a weird pattern in the soft white carpet of snow.

Suddenly a crash and a crackle sounded in the taiga. Most likely a mass of frozen snow had gone crashing down through the branches from the top of a tree.

Before, in Moscow, Geek had thought that the whole world consisted of Moscow, its streets, houses, trams and buses.

Now it seemed to him that the whole world was one huge dark forest.

Geek was like that: if the sun shone over him, he was sure the sky all round the earth was clear of clouds or rain.

And when he felt happy he thought that everybody else in the world must be happy too.

Two days passed. Came a third, and still no watchman appeared from the forest. There was a feeling of alarm in the little snow-bound hut.

It was most terrifying of all in the evenings and at night. They locked and bolted the doors of both the room and porch, and blacked out the windows with mats so that the light would not attract the beasts to the house, although they should have done just the opposite, because a beast is not a man, and it is afraid of light. The wind howled in the chimney, of course, and when the blizzard outside whipped sharp little icicles against the walls and the windowpanes, it seemed to those inside that someone was scrapping and scratching there.

They climbed into the bunk above the stove and Mother told them all sorts of stories and fairy tales. At last she dozed off.

"Chuck," said Geek. "How is it there are magicians only in fairy tales? Wouldn't it be fun if there were real magicians?"

"And witches and devils too?"

Geek shook his head in annoyance. "No, who cares for devils anyway? They're no good for anything. But if we could call a magician, we could tell him to fly over to Father and let him know we've come long ago."

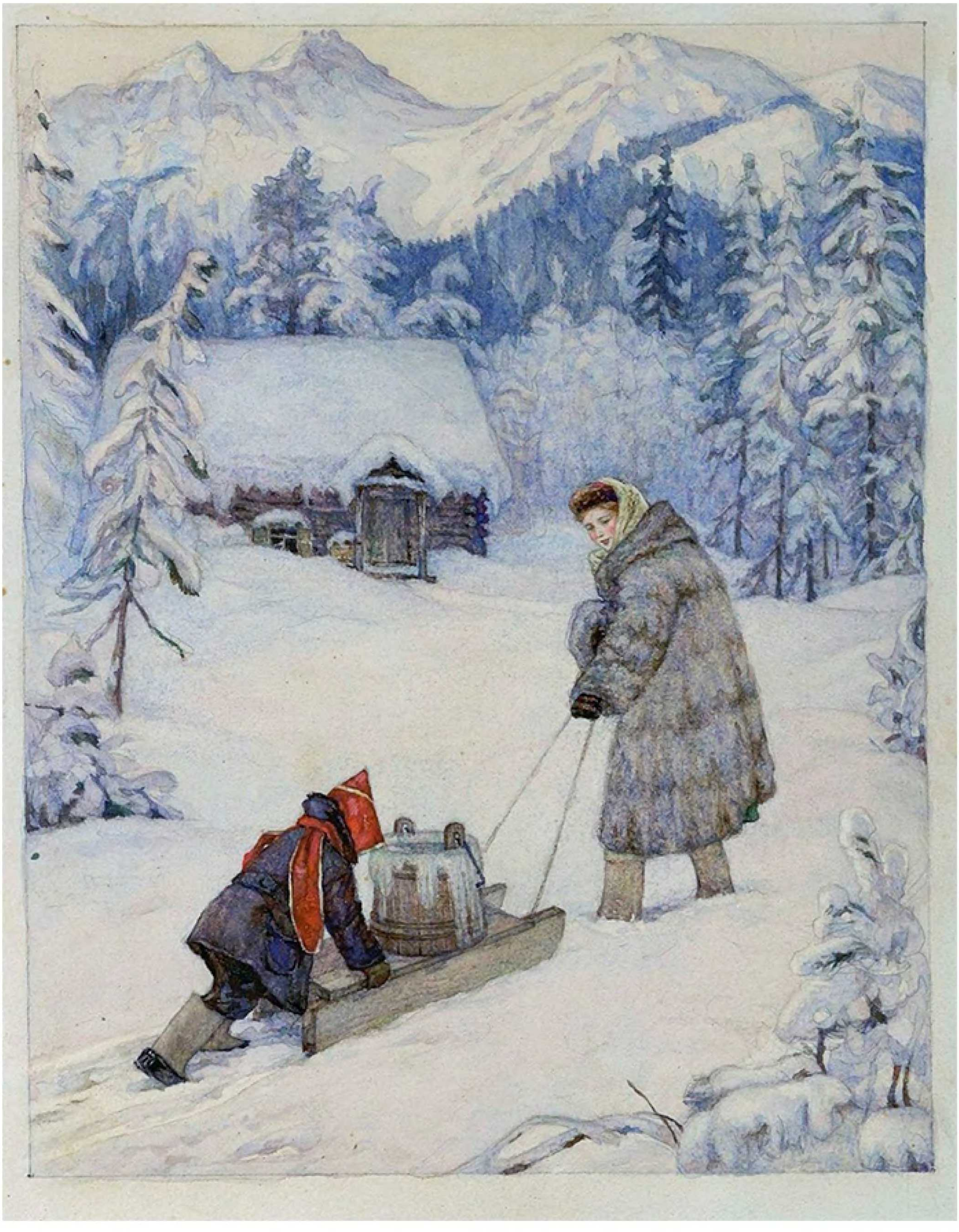
"But what would he fly on?"

"Fly on? . . . Why, he'd just flap his arms or do something else. He'd find a way, don't you worry."

"It's too cold now for him to flap his arms," said Chuck. "Look at me: I had my gloves on, and mittens too, and still I got my fingers frozen bringing in the wood."

"No, but honestly, Chuck, don't you think it would be fun?"

Chuck wavered. "How should I know? Remember the lame man who lived in the basement in our yard, where Mishka Kryukov lives? Well, he used to sell doughnuts, and all sorts of old women used to come to him and get their fortunes told—you know, about who'd have luck and who wouldn't and all that."



"Well, did their fortunes really come true?"

"I don't know. I only know the militia came and took him away and a lot of things were found in his place."

"Well, that shows he wasn't a magician at all. He was just a crook. What do you think?"

"Of course he was a crook," Chuck agreed. "But what I mean is—all magicians are crooks. What does a fellow like him want to work for, when all he has to do is wriggle through a hole to get what he wants? But you'd better go to sleep, Geek, because I'm not going to talk to you any more."

"Why not?"

"Because you're talking a lot of nonsense and then you'll have a nightmare and dig your knees and elbows into me. You think it was nice having you punch me in the stomach last night? Here, let me try it on you."

*

On the morning of the fourth day Mother had to chop firewood herself. They had eaten the hare long ago and the magpies had already picked the bones clean. All they had for dinner that day was porridge with lard and onions. Their stock of bread was giving out, but Mother found some flour and baked a few biscuits for them.

After that dinner Geek felt very low, and Mother wondered if he hadn't developed a temperature.

She ordered him to stay inside. Then she dressed Chuck, took pails and a little sleigh, and the two went out for water and to gather twigs to start the stove with in the morning.

Geek was left alone. He waited and waited. Then he grew restless, and. . . .

*

Chuck and Mother were gone for some time. On their way back the little sleigh with the pails of water overturned, and they had to go back to the spring. Then, halfway home, they discovered that Chuck had left one of his mittens at the edge of the forest. Again they turned back. In the meantime dusk fell.

When they got home at last Geek was nowhere to be found. First they thought he was hiding under a pile of sheepskins on the stove bunk; but no, he was not there. Chuck smiled slyly and whispered into Mother's ear that Geek, of course, was under the stove.

Mother grew very angry at that and ordered Geek to come out at once. But Geek was silent.

Then Chuck took the long stove fork and began to poke about with it under the stove. No, Geek was not there.

Mother became really worried then. She glanced at the nail near the door. Geek's coat and hat were missing.

She went out and looked round the house. Then she came back and lit the lantern. She peered into the dark storage room and into the woodshed.

She called Geek, she scolded and wheedled, but no response came. And meanwhile the gloom was swiftly swallowing up the snowdrifts.

Mother darted into the house again, tore the gun off its nail, seized the cartridges and lantern, and, telling Chuck not to dare leave the house, ran outside.

Plenty of footprints had been stamped into the snow during the past four days.

She did not know where to begin her search, but decided to go out to the road since she did not think Geek would have dared to go into the forest alone.

There was not a soul on the road.

She loaded the gun and fired it. Then she strained her ears. She fired a second time and then a third.

Suddenly from somewhere quite near came an answering report. Somebody was hurrying to the rescue. She wanted to rush forward but her felt boots sank in the snow. The lantern fell out of her hand, its glass broke and the light went out.

Suddenly a piercing scream came from the porch of the watchman's hut.

That was Chuck. When he heard the shots he thought that the wolves which had devoured Geek were now attacking Mother.

Mother threw the lantern aside, and ran panting to the house. She pushed the coatless Chuck inside, flung the gun into a corner, dipped a ladleful of icy water and took a few hasty gulps.

There was a clatter and a banging on the steps. Then the door flew open. Into the house, in a cloud of vapour, raced the dog followed by the watchman.

"What's the matter? What's all the firing about?" he asked, without greeting them or taking off his things.

"I've lost my boy." Tears streamed down Mother's face. She could say no more.

"Just a moment, now. Stop crying," the watchman snapped. "When did you lose him? Long ago? Or just now? Back, Fearless!" he ordered the dog. "Speak up, now, or I'll go away again!"

"An hour ago," Mother replied. "We were out fetching water and when we came back he was gone. He put on his coat and hat and walked off."

"He couldn't have gone very far in an hour, and if he's wearing his felt boots and coat he can't be frozen. Come here, Fearless. Have a sniff at this."

The watchman pulled Geek's hood off the hook. Then he shoved the hood and Geek's galoshes under the dog's nose.

The dog sniffed at the things carefully and lifted his clever eyes to his master's face.

"This way!" cried the watchman, throwing the door open. "Go, Fearless, find him!"

But the dog wagged his tail and remained where he was.

"Go," said the watchman sternly. "Find, Fearless, find!" The dog nosed the air restlessly and pawed the floor, but did not budge.

"What's all this capering about?" the watchman demanded crossly. Once more he shoved the hood and galoshes under the dog's nose, and then took hold of its collar.

But Fearless would not follow the watchman. He turned round and round and finally went off in the opposite direction.

He stopped near a big wooden trunk and scratched its lid with his shaggy paw. Then, turning to his master, he gave three loud and lazy barks.

The watchman handed his gun to the astounded mother, went over to the trunk and threw back its lid.

There, on a heap of sheepskins and sacks, lay Geek fast asleep. He was covered with his coat, and his head rested on his hat.

When he was lifted out and roused, his sleepy eyes blinked. He could not understand why such a fuss and pother was being made about him. Mother kept kissing him and crying. Chuck tugged at his arms and legs, jumping up and down.

"Hurrah! Hurrah!" he shouted.

Shaggy Fearless, upon whose nose Chuck planted a kiss, turned away in embarrassment. He could not understand what the commotion was about either. He wagged his tail gently, and eyed with longing a chunk of bread lying on the table.

It turned out that Geek had become terribly lonely when Mother and Chuck went out for water, and he decided to play a practical joke on them. He took down his hat and coat and climbed into the trunk. His idea was to wait till they got back and began searching for him, and then give them the scare of their lives by bellowing inside the trunk.

But since they had taken such a long time to come, he just lay there patiently, and before he knew it he dozed off.

Suddenly the watchman stood up and clapped a heavy key and a creased blue envelope on the table.

"Here, this is for you," he said. "This is the key to the room of our chief Seryogin and to the pantry, and a letter from him. He'll be here with his men in four days, just in time for New Year's Eve."

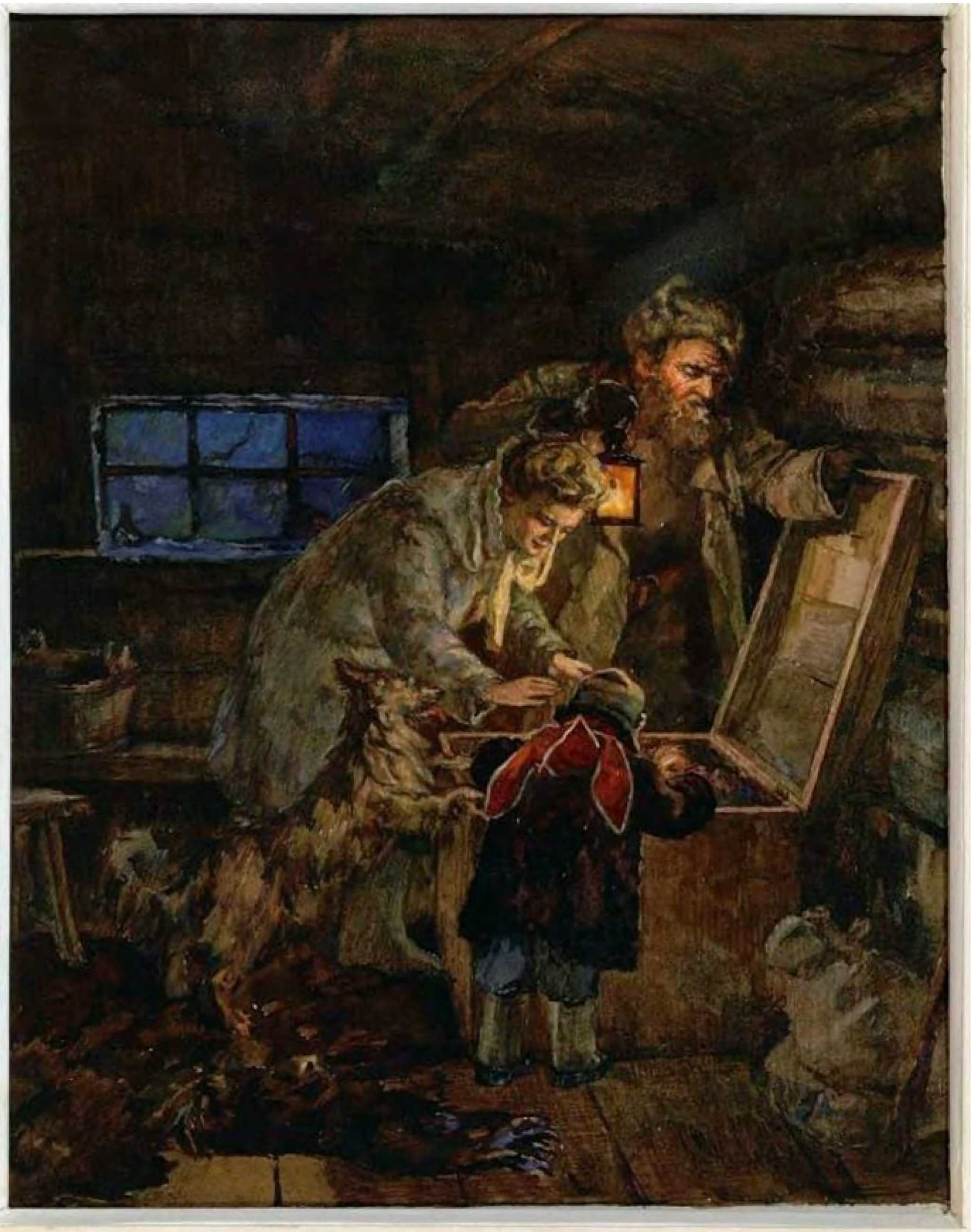
So that was where this surly, gruff-looking old man had been! He said he had to look after his traps, and instead he had skied all the way to the distant Alkarash Gorge.

Leaving the letter unopened, Mother got up and placed her hand in gratitude on the old man's shoulder.

But he merely began to grumble at Geek for overturning the box of wads in the trunk, and at Mother for breaking the lantern. He grumbled long and persistently but nobody was scared of this glum old man any more.

Mother did not let Geek out of her sight the whole evening, and at the slightest noise snatched at his hand as if she were afraid he would suddenly disappear.

She was so nice to him that Chuck finally took offence and was sorry he hadn't thought of climbing into the trunk too.



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And now the real fun began. The next morning the watchman unlocked Father's room, heated the stove to a blaze, and brought over their things. The room was large and filled with light, but everything in it was in great disorder.

Mother began house cleaning at once. All day long she moved things from place to place, scrubbed, washed and dusted.

When, in the evening, the watchman brought in some firewood, he stopped at the threshold in amazement. The room was so clean he dared not take another step. But Fearless came right in.

He bounded across the freshly-scrubbed floor towards Geek and nudged him with his cold nose. "Hello, silly," he seemed to be saying, "it was I who found you and you ought to give me something to eat for that."

Mother threw Fearless a piece of sausage.

Whereupon the watchman started to grumble and declared that if dogs were to be fed on sausage in the taiga, the magpies would be set a-laughing.

And so Mother sliced off a half-length of sausage for him too. He said "Thank you", and went out, muttering to himself and shaking his grey head at the queer ways of city folks.

*

The next day they decided to put up a New Year's tree.

What didn't they use in making the decorations!

They cut all the coloured pictures out of the old magazines they found. Rags and cotton went into the manufacture of dolls and animals. From Father's tobacco box they took all the tissue paper and made lovely flowers.

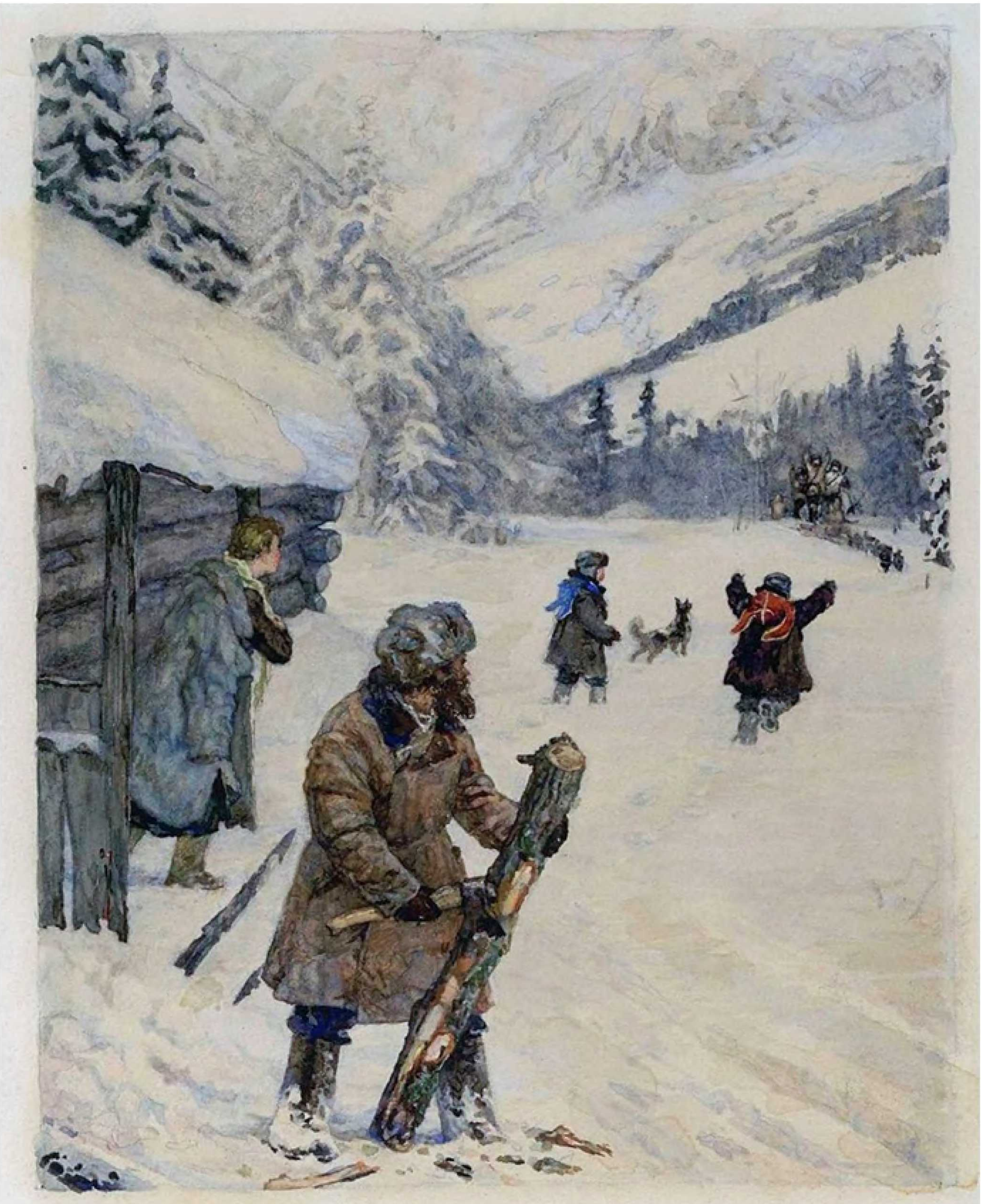
Surly and gloomy though he was, after bringing in the firewood the watchman would stand in the doorway for a long time marvelling at their ingenuity. At last he could contain himself no longer. He brought them some tin foil, the kind that was used to wrap tea in, and a big chunk of wax left over from his cobbling work.

What fun! The decorations factory was immediately transformed into a candle factory. The candles were crude little things, but they burned as brightly as the best to be had in the city shops.

Now all that was lacking was the tree. Mother asked the watchman for his axe. He made no reply but stood up, put on his skis and went out to the forest.

In half an hour he was back.

Well, you can say what you like: you can say the decorations were not so attractive, that the rag bunnies looked more like cats, that the dolls were all alike— straight-nosed and goggle-eyed—and that the fir cones wrapped in tin foil did not sparkle as brightly as the coloured glass bulbs you see in the shops. But the fir tree— why, there wasn't one like it in the whole of Moscow! It was a real taiga beauty—tall and stately, with branches tipped with little green stars.



*

Four days slipped by unnoticed. And then at last New Year's Eve arrived. From early morning Chuck and Geek could not be made to come indoors. Their noses were blue, but they tramped about in the frost, expecting Father and his men to appear at any moment. The watchman, who was busy heating the bath, told them they were freezing themselves to icicles for nothing because the party would not return before dinnertime.

And that was exactly what happened. No sooner had they sat down to table when the watchman knocked at the window. Throwing on their coats helter-skelter all three tumbled out on the porch.

"Keep a sharp look-out now," the watchman said. "In a few seconds you'll see them on the slope to the right of the big summit, then they'll disappear again in the taiga, and inside of thirty minutes they'll be home."

And so they were. First to come into sight from the mountain pass was a dog team harnessed to a few loaded sleighs, and after them came a group of swift skiers.

They looked very tiny out there with the huge mountains behind them, but their arms, legs and heads were clearly etched against the white snow.

Down the treeless slope they skimmed, and then they disappeared in the forest. In exactly half an hour the sounds of barking and shouting and the creaking of sleighs could be heard close at hand.

Sensing the nearness of home, the hungry dogs shot out of the woods. And behind them, keeping pace, sped nine skiers.

When the men sighted Mother and Chuck and Geek on the porch they waved their poles in the air and gave a loud cheer.

Geek could not wait any longer after that and jumped down the steps. His felt boots sinking deep in the snow, he ran towards the tall bearded man who headed the group and who was shouting "Hurrah" louder than all the others.

The rest of the afternoon the men washed, shaved and cleaned up.

*

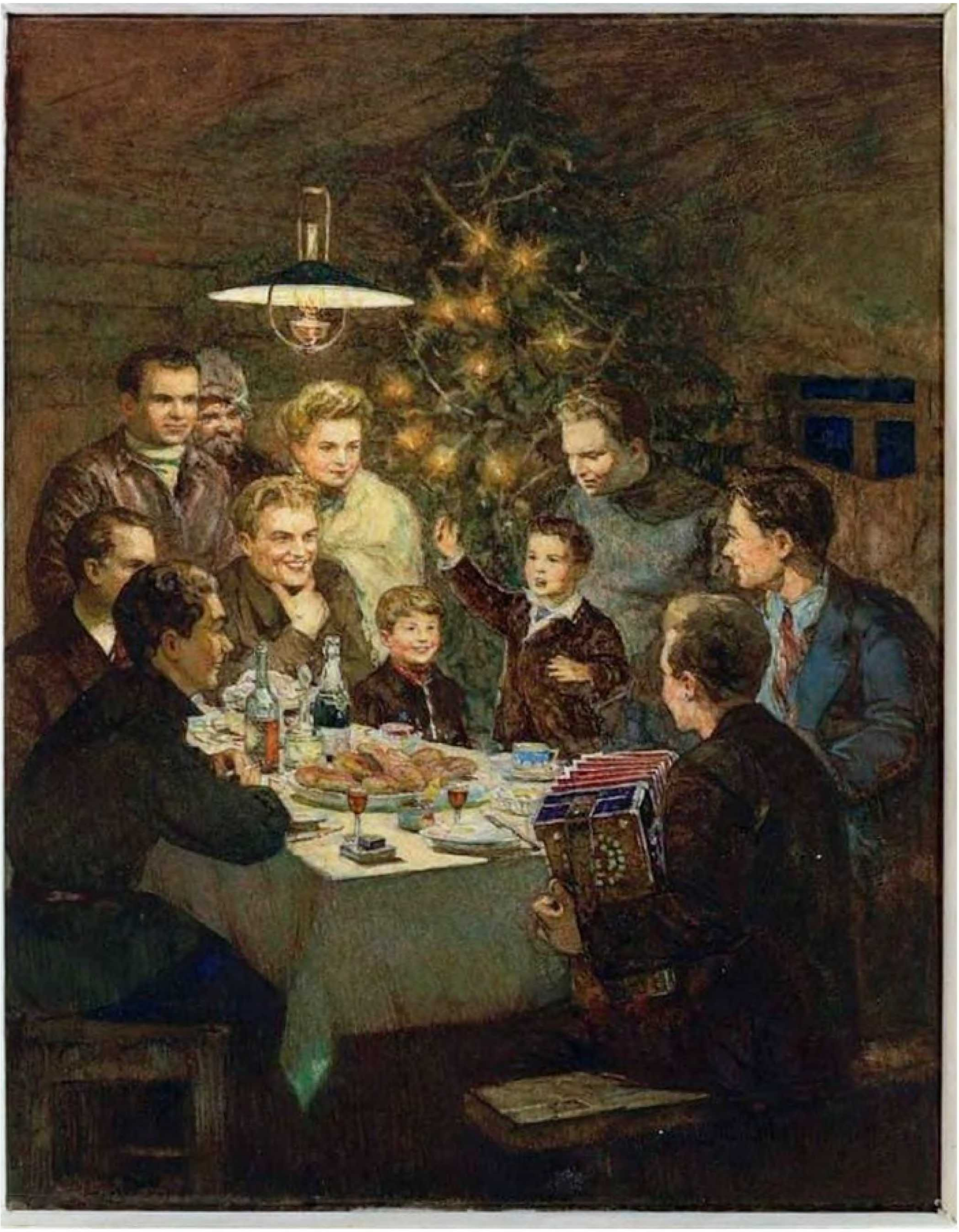
And in the evening they all gathered at a merry New Year's party.

The table was laid, the lamp blown out and the candles lighted. But since, except for Chuck and Geek, all the others were grown-ups, they did not know what to do after that.

It was a lucky thing one of the men had an accordion. He brought it out and played a lively waltz. Everybody jumped up and began to dance. And they all danced very well indeed—especially when they danced with Mother.

But Father did not know how to dance. He was very big and good-natured, and he had only to pace the floor, let alone dance, to set all the crockery clattering in the cupboard.

He sat Chuck and Geek on his knees and they loudly applauded everybody.



Soon the dancing ended. Geek was asked to sing a song.

Geek did not have to be coaxed. He knew he could sing and he was proud of it.

The accordion-player accompanied him. I no longer remember what he sang. But I do remember that it was a fine song, because everybody was very quiet while he sang it. When he paused for breath you could hear the candles sputtering and the wind moaning outside.

And when he finished they all began to clap and shout. They seized Geek and wanted to toss him up in the air. But Mother quickly snatched him away from them, because she was afraid they might hit him against the wooden ceiling in the excitement.

"Now sit down, everybody," said Father, glancing at his watch. "The main part of the programme is about to begin." He switched on the radio.

They all sat down and waited in silence.

At first it was very quiet. Then they heard a noise, and the sound of motorcars honking their horns. Then there was a sort of scraping and hissing, and from far away came a melodious tinkle.

Big and little bells were ringing a refrain like this:

Teer-lil-lilli-dong!
Teer-lil-lilli-dong!

Chuck and Geek looked at each other. They knew what that was. It was the golden Kremlin chimes pealing out beneath the red star of the Spassky Tower in faraway Moscow.

And those chimes—on the eve of New Year—were heard by people everywhere—in town and hillside, in steppe and taiga, and on the blue seas.

And, of course, the preoccupied commander of the armoured train, the one who waited so vigilantly for Voroshilov's orders—he also heard the chimes.

Everybody stood up. All wished one another a Happy New Year. And lots of happiness.

Each understood the meaning of happiness in his own way. But one and all knew and understood that they must live honourably, work hard, and love and cherish the vast, happy land known as the Soviet Union.

1939

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